

Press Release

September 27, 2004

27 TONS OF COCAINE SEIZED FROM TWO VESSELS IN PACIFIC

WASHINGTON – The Department of Homeland Security today announced that a multi-agency task force investigation based in Florida has resulted in the seizure of roughly 27 tons of cocaine and the arrest of 18 individuals aboard two fishing vessels in the Eastern Pacific. The two seizures are among the largest maritime seizures of cocaine in United States history.

On September 17, 2004, the USS *Curts*, with a U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement detachment on board, intercepted the fishing vessel *Lina Maria*, approximately 300 miles southwest of the Galapagos Islands. Aboard the vessel, the Coast Guard boarding team found approximately 14.52 tons of cocaine. Ten crewmembers were arrested.

On September 26, 2004, the USS *Crommelin*, with a U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement detachment on board, intercepted the fishing vessel *San Jose*, the sister vessel of the *Lina Maria*, approximately 1,000 miles south of Manzanillo, Mexico. Aboard the vessel, the Coast Guard law enforcement detachment found approximately 13 tons of cocaine. Eight crewmembers were arrested.

These seizures bring the total cocaine seized by the Coast Guard this year to a record 240,519 pounds, worth approximately \$7.3 billion. The previous annual record of 138,393 pounds was surpassed May 29 with the seizure of 4,300 pounds of cocaine from a go-fast vessel in the Eastern Pacific.

The back-to-back seizures were the result of a multi-agency, collaborative effort under the auspices of “Operation Panama Express” which is a long-standing Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force investigation based out of Tampa, Florida.

Members of the “Operation Panama Express” team include the U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Florida, the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South), the Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigative Division, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the Sheriff’s Offices from Pinellas and Sarasota Counties.

John Walters, Director of National Drug Control Policy, stated, “I commend all the federal agencies involved that have contributed to this successful effort. Every ton of

cocaine seized is a ton of cocaine kept off of our nation's streets and away from our children. Drug use in America is declining and we hope to continue these declines by pursuing effective programs that reduce both the demand and supply of drugs."

"Vastly improved intelligence gathering and more coordinated operations with our enforcement and intelligence partners has meant our cutter and aircraft crews are increasingly finding themselves in the right place at the right time to detect and intercept any threat," said Adm. Thomas H. Collins, Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard. "The Coast Guard is committed to denying the seas to those who wish to harm our citizens, and this disruption of the illegal drug trade is part of our successful, layered homeland security strategy."

"Organizations with the capacity to move this quantity of contraband in the holds of ships pose a serious threat to our homeland. Battling this threat requires an intelligence-based approach by law enforcement. These seizures demonstrate what can be achieved when our drug interdiction efforts are guided by quality intelligence – as ICE, DEA and FBI agents jointly developed the information that ultimately led to the interdiction of these vessels," said Michael J. Garcia, the Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

In the first seizure, ICE, FBI, and DEA agents on the Panama Express investigative team developed intelligence that the *Lina Maria* was transporting cocaine in the Pacific. The agents passed this data to the JIATF-South, which dispatched aircraft from the U.S. Navy, ICE, and the Coast Guard to intercept the cocaine-laden vessel. In addition, JIATF-South dispatched vessels from the Navy and Coast Guard for the same purpose.

Shortly thereafter, an ICE P-3 surveillance aircraft spotted the *Lina Maria* traveling off the coast of Ecuador and passed the information on to JIATF-South and a nearby Navy aircraft. A U.S. Navy vessel, with a Coast Guard law enforcement detachment on board, subsequently intercepted the *Lina Maria*. The Coast Guard boarding team found the cocaine concealed in a sealed ballast tank on the ship and detained 10 individuals.

The second seizure occurred in much the same fashion, with information developed by FBI, ICE, and DEA agents on the Panama Express investigative team. The intelligence was passed on to JIATF-South, which dispatched aircraft and vessels for interception.

An ICE P-3 surveillance aircraft spotted the vessel 1,500 miles southwest of Manta, Ecuador. ICE and Coast Guard aircraft monitored the *San Jose* until a U.S. Navy ship with a Coast Guard law enforcement detachment on board intercepted the cocaine-laden vessel on September 23. The Coast Guard boarding team found the cocaine in a hold buried under fish and ice. Eight individuals were taken into custody.

More information on the Coast Guard's drug interdiction program can be found at <http://www.uscg.mil/factfile>, under "Drug Interdiction."

Still images of Coast Guard drug interdiction operations can be found at
<http://cgvi.uscg.mil/>.

Video of the San Jose boarding is available for download at
<http://www.uscg.mil/news/headquarters/sanjose.wmv>.

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